From Vanity to Geist:

The Meaning of "German Society" in *Vanity Fair*

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Although we can presume Thackeray's motive in writing *Vanity Fair* from the German section, this section has been studied with little relevance to the whole story or the *raison d'être* of the novel. Scholars have devoted themselves to the German section[1]; nevertheless, until now none of them have really understood the significance of the section to the story as a whole.

The novel starts in England. But the beginning of the story in chronological order is embedded in chapter sixty-two — the German scene. It is in the German city of "Pumpernickel" that the narrator meets some of the most important characters for the first time.[2] According to the narrator, his chief motive in writing the story lies in the scene where, in the opera house of Pumpernickel, he becomes interested in Amelia, who is moved to tears by Beethoven's opera, *Fidelio*. He supposes, "it was because it was predestined that I was to write this particular lady's memoirs that I remarked her" (603).

On careful consideration of what the narrator says in the above quotation and its circumstances, it is noticed that the German related things [the location, the opera in German and its German composer] are inconspicuously but rather thickly described, as if they have something to do with the narrator's motive in writing the novel.

Thackeray was very familiar with Germany as Gordon N. Ray said, "he [Thackeray] had gained a good command of the

language and considerable insight into German character and literature" (Ray, *The Uses*, 146). And from Lewis Melville's statement that "At Weimar ... the idea occurred to him [Thackeray] to write for the English public a book on Germany and German literature, but he made not the slightest attempt to carry out these schemes" (Melville 1:91), it is inferred that Thackeray certainly would have introduced something of German culture to the British people in a book intended for a domestic audience.

Contrary to Melville's assertion, I believe Thackeray did indeed carry out the schemes by describing and comparing German and British society in *Vanity Fair*. If the author's message or lesson to a domestic British audience, which he absorbed from his experiences in Germany, underlies the whole story without being noticed, parts other than the German section need to be reconsidered. The key scene in the opera house above implies that Thackeray's motive in writing the novel is closely related to Germany.

Thus, the German section suggests Thackeray's motive and requires me to reconsider *Vanity Fair* by taking this section not in isolation but as an essential part of the whole story.

I "I introduce Geist."

It was Matthew Arnold who introduced first the German word "Geist" and its concept to England. It was about twenty-five years after the publication of *Vanity Fair*. In an essay of an epistolary style called *Friendship's Garland*, Arnold creates what he considers a typical German, called Arminius and makes him explain the meaning of Geist in the scene where Arnold says the words "liberalism" and "despotism".

> "Liberalism and despotism!" cried the Prussian [Arminius]; "let us get beyond these forms and words. What unites

> and separates people now is *Geist*.... The same idea is at the bottom of democracy; the victory of reason and intelligence over blind custom and prejudice." (Arnold, *FG* 40)

Although the German word Geist is usually translated as "mind" in English and *OED* gives a workable, if not strictly accurate, definition,[3] we cannot find an English equivalent for the word, which also fully expresses its concept. But a German political scientist, Herman Joachim Levi, has left a lucid explanation of this word:

> The word [Geist] is hard to translate. It is not fully expressed by such terms as "mind" or "spirit" or "intellect," but it contains some elements of all these concepts. Arnold knew exactly what he meant by the term, however, and he has clearly expressed this meaning in some of his other books, notably in *Culture and Anarchy*. (Levi 7)

Levi, however, managed to express the concept of the word with the help of reference to *Culture and Anarchy* by describing what the man of Geist looks like:

> Man is gifted with power of looking behind the external appearances of things, and thus he is able to penetrate into the realm of an "unclouded clearness of mind," and thus to follow the example of the Greeks and cultivate their attitude instead of glorifying material progress, narrow-minded ethics, and the strict traditional rules of good behaviour. (Levi 8)

Though the first chapter of *Friendship's* bears the title "I introduce Arminius and 'Geist' to the British Public", the real meaning of Geist, as Levi says, cannot be represented by one essay or one word. That's why Arnold tried to convey and explain the full meaning of the word through his books.

Why, then, did Arnold try very hard to import the word by taking the trouble to write a number of books? Logically, I suppose that he would acutely think the concept was necessary for British people in those days. In other words, for Arnold, the word Geist was not only the word whose concept English did not have, but also a word which, he considered, was important and needed in Britain.

At the same periods as Arnold's, there are such people as were meekly satisfied with the glorious prosperity on the one hand, but felt that something was lacking on the other hand. For example, Thomas Carlyle says that "England is full of wealth, of multifarious produce, supply for human want in every kind; yet England is dying of inanition" (Carlyle 1). Also C. F. G. Masterman takes a general view of the state of the middle class in the age and says, "... in all efforts the general effect is of something lacking; not so much in individual happiness, or even in bodily and mental development, as of a certain communal poverty of interest and ideal" (Masterman 62).[4] These phrases appear to show that people of the mid-Victorian period, especially the British middle classes, felt something was wanting in spite of being so well provided for. Can it be possible that Arnold imported the word Geist in order to shed some light on such an incomprehensible condition in the British society at that time? The attitude of the British observed by Arnold also seems to be reflected in the eyes of Arminius as a foreigner in *Friendship's*.

> [Arminius] "You [Arnold] have said that the strength of North Germany lay in this, that the idea of science governed every department of human activity there. You, my dear friend, live in a country where at present the idea of clap-trap governs every department of human activity ... I will give you this piece of advice, with which I take my

leave: *Get 'Geist'*" (Arnold, *FG* 42)

Arnold has firstly introduced the concept of Geist to England physically. But I suppose that the concept and its necessity for England already have been alluded to in the novels such as *Vanity Fair*. It is often said that, in terms of the art of fiction, the reality of *Vanity Fair* has been thought of as the avant-garde of realistic novels in the twentieth century. I think Thackeray anticipated not only the reality of fiction but also what they need spiritually in the near future or a new era in the spirit of times, in short, *Zeitgeist*.

When Thackeray was writing *Vanity Fair*, the middle classes in England such as described in the novel have begun to blindly admire and follow material prosperity or "the idea of clap-trap" in order to develop their life, and they have been inclined to forget the reason behind the surface of things and lose their original view of happiness. *Vanity Fair* would be produced under and reflect such conditions.

II Vanity Fair, Society without Geist

Is it possible that the condition of British society described in *Vanity Fair* reflects that of the real one revealed in section I ? I pay attention to the common state of the two societies from the viewpoint of a lack of the concept of Geist.

In order to examine the British society in the novel, it could be useful to focus on the major characters [Amelia Sedley, Becky Sharp and William Dobbin] in it because they are regarded as members of society and their common and shared attitudes can be thought to reflect the nature of society. It is well known that the characters in *Vanity Fair* are likened to puppets in its opening lines:

The famous little Becky Puppet has been pronounced to

> be uncommonly flexible in the joints, and lively on the wire: the Amelia Doll, though it has had a smaller circle of admirers, has yet been carved and dressed with the greatest care by the artist: the Dobbin Figure, though apparently clumsy, yet dances in a very amusing and natural manner. (6)

About comparing the characters to puppets Ioan M. Williams says:

> ... none of the characters acquire the status of human beings; all are puppets in a very sense, driven by their desires rather than purposefully seeking an object worthy of the devotion of complete men and women (Williams 76).

Williams' statement seems to be persuasive. But it seems that the main characters do not always pursue their own desires to the end as Williams says. That is because Thackeray also describes their circumstances after they have attained their aim in life: Amelia has wept her life away since she lost her husband George Osborne at the Battle of Waterloo soon after her long-cherished marriage to him. Also Becky leads a vagabond and wretched life after she has been presented to her Sovereign at Court, which she regards as her aim in life. Dobbin, too, decides to live alone after he gives up loving Amelia.

About the personalities of the main characters, most of critics are unanimous in following points: Becky is a wise and discerning person but heartless and always looking out for her own interests. Also she follows the cult of money and struggles to attain a high position in society. Amelia is unconcerned about money or material prosperity and is a woman of tender sensibilities, easily moved to tears and though she has little insight. Dobbin exercises his insight into everything except

Amelia with whom he has been in love all his life. He is an obliging person, though he pokes his nose into everybody's affairs.

If one puts together the faults of these three characters, one would recognize that the total contrasts with Levi's description of the man with Geist quoted in section 1. First, to borrow Levi's expressions, Becky is "glorifying material progress". Second, Amelia has little "power of looking behind the external appearances of things", neither does Dobbin use it in the sense that he is blind to Amelia's faults even though he has insight. Third, Dobbin is "narrow-minded", and adheres to "the strict traditional rules of good behavior". Therefore, it can be thought that none of them have reached the man with Geist and all have failed in some way.

The problem is not that they are "driven by their own desires", but that they are manipulated by rubbish or nonsense ideas such as conventional and irrational ideas to lead a good life or idols like lovers who do not necessarily deserve pure and noble love. Furthermore, they think little about the reason behind things and have lost the ideas of science, which could bring the happiness. Under these conditions the characters are surely like puppets, walking on air through the master's manipulation without their own souls.

It seems that the characters still have doubts about their life or feel something lacking even when they lead a decent life, as Carlyle points out in *Past and Present*. When Becky is satisfied with what she is to some extent, she talks to herself as follows:

> I have a gentleman for my husband, and an Earl's daughter for my sister, in the very house where I was little better than a servant a few years ago. But am I much better to do now in the world than I was when I was the poor

painter's daughter ... ? (410)

In what situation, then, do the characters feel happy? Ironically, it seems that they rather feel happy when they are working hard for their living or lead an unsatisfied life. For instance, the narrator comments on the busy life of the Sedleys after they have gone into bankruptcy as follows: "I don't think they were unhappy. Perhaps they were a little prouder in their downfall than in their prosperity" (374). Also Amelia, in her widowhood, spends "many long, silent, tearful, but happy years" (377).

Miss Pinkerton's Academy described at the beginning of the novel appears to play an important role to set the tone for the whole English society in the novel. Needless to say, the Academy trains girls to be ladies, who can desirably get married with gentlemen of the upper class, in short, so to speak, in order to become happy. For Becky, who spent her girlhood in the free and open atmosphere of her father's studio, the Academy is nothing but a "genteel prison" (Prawer 1):

> The rigid formality of the place suffocated her [Becky]: the prayers and the meals, the lessons and the walks, which were arranged with a conventional regularity, oppressed her almost beyond endurance.... (22)

The problem is not that the Academy is too strict, but that teachers in the Academy believe in and teach "the strict traditional rules of good behavior" probably without really knowing why they do so. Does Becky feel pain in the Academy not only because she has been accustomed to freedom but also because she sees through the uselessness of the formality? On the other hand, Amelia, who, in the Academy, was used to obeying the manner book of rhetorical flourishes that has little practical use, always bases her way of thinking on a

theological work called "Washerwoman of Finchley Common" or religious pamphlets, even after her graduation. It cannot be too much to say that Amelia is manipulated by "the idea of clap-trap" and doesn't have her own opinions arrived at through her own logical deduction. Anthony Trollope says that "Amelia is a true, honest-hearted, thoroughly English young woman" (Trollope 105).

British society in *Vanity Fair* has certainly different aspects. But a certain image of society seems to rise to the surface through the text by referring to the real condition of British society; a society where people are always unsatisfied with what they are despite their decent lives and never reach to solid satisfaction though they blindly follow traditional ways to happiness. That is because they often tend to lack a rational way of thinking and lose their innate notion of happiness.

III Geist city, Pumpernickel

Now what does the German society in the novel look like? On considering German society in the novel, I have to keep in mind that Thackeray described German society rather affirmatively in the novel because in fact he had received a good impression from Germany, as we know from biographical facts.[5] It is inevitable that one infers from his experiences in Weimar that Thackeray is pro-German. But even if this is the case, it seems to be important that I will consider on which point Thackeray respected and was influenced by German society and why he conceived of the idea to write about this society in his novel. I will not discuss the differences between English and German societies one by one. On the contrary, I will focus on just a minor difference in the attitude of the people in the two societies, which seems to be one of the most significant

elements in *Vanity Fair.*

The condition of the German society seems to be condensed in the Opera of Pumpernickel because, according to the narrator, "whither everybody went in the cheery social little German place" (602). When Dobbin and Amelia go to the Opera, it is described as follows:

> They went to the Opera often of evenings — to those snug, unassuming, dear old operas in the German towns, where the noblesse sits and cries, and knits stockings on the one side, over against the bourgeoisie on the other ... and the pit is full of the most elegant slim-waisted officers with straw-coloured mustachios, and two pence a day on full pay. (600)

For the citizens of Pumpernickel, an appreciation of opera was not confined to the noble class but was enjoyed by everybody. They went to the Opera not for appearance's sake but for their delectation. It could be argued that it is a German characteristic to value substance above form and that this is deeply related to the concept of Geist. For they have their own way of enjoying the opera by exerting both the idea of science and their power of looking behind the things. Herman Levi says of Carlyle and Arnold that "it was natural that the attention of Englishmen such as Carlyle and Arnold should be turned to a country where ... the spirit of Art for Art's sake and Thought for Thought's sake appeared to govern" (Levi 8). Could Thackeray be one of these Englishmen?

Of course, in the Pumpernickel theater, an opera in Italian such as Mozart's *Don Juan* was also performed. But when the narrator meets Amelia for the first time in the theater as mentioned before, that is, when the German opera *Fidelio* is performed, he cannot help but notice her remarkable manner of

being deeply impressed by the opera. *Fidelio* seems to be given more significant connotation than other operas referred to in *Vanity Fair*. That is not only because it is performed in the important scene where the narrator decides to write the novel, but also because it is rather idiosyncratic in nature itself. In his explanation of *Fidelio*, Hirokazu Kanno says that:

> Not all the listeners of *Fidelio* are asked and needed to understand the German language. The most important thing is that the composer was devoted to pursue the music and the ideas through it such as justice, love, freedom, and light. (Kanno 10 Trans. mine)

It can be said that *Fidelio* is an unaffected opera. But that is why Amelia is greatly moved by the opera in spite of having no knowledge of the German language. The narrator depicts how she was as follows:

> I could not help remarking the effect which the magnificent actress and music produced upon Mrs. Osborne [Amelia] ... the English lady's face wore such an expression of wonder and delight.... (603)

The state of the Opera in German society and the features of *Fidelio* remind us of Arminius's words: "let us get beyond these forms and words". That is to say, it can be said that *Fidelio* in particular as well as the state of the Opera in general was the product of the people's attitude in that they value substance above form with the idea of science. Would Thackeray want us to perceive this nature of *Fidelio*?

Fidelio is also given a more important role in this novel, I think. It appears to play a metaphysical role to the novel itself. It is often said that Thackeray ridiculed the upper middle and aristocratic classes and society full of show and display in

Vanity Fair. But it is not, I feel, the whole meaning of the novel. Serious ideas seem to be hidden behind the superficial and verbal texture of the novel.

It is well known that Thackeray began to write *Vanity Fair*, before he had finished concluding *The Snobs of England*.[6] By considering biographical facts and letters of Thackeray, Ray makes the assertion that "late in 1846 he [Thackeray] experienced a change of heart" (Ray, *Selection* 99). Ray concludes that his change of attitude as a novelist can also be found in the last paragraph of *The Snobs*:

> To laugh at such [the snobs] is Mr. Punch's business. May he laugh honestly, hit no foul blow, and tell the truth when at his very broadest grin — never forgetting that if Fun is good, Truth is still better, and Love is best of all. (*The Snobs* 266)

For Thackeray, this paragraph reflects his change in attitude as a novelist. It is certain that the contents of his works were more serious and profound after he wrote this paragraph. The problem is that Thackeray had already demonstrated the impulse to deal with serious matters when he started to write *Vanity Fair*. The last paragraph of *The Snobs* seems almost contradictory to the tone of its contents up to this point. Thackeray began to write *Vanity Fair* before *The Snobs* was concluded as if he knew that he could not describe what he wanted to express in *The Snobs*.

Considering these biographical facts, the second role of *Fidelio* now comes into play. It suggests that the serious ideas are concealed by Thackeray's satirical words in *Vanity Fair* as if the opera conveyed the serious ideas behind its music. This could be the reason why *Fidelio* was performed in the scene, which gave the opportunity to start the novel, where the

narrator sees Amelia for the first time. The common idea or a key word between *Fidelio* and the last paragraph of *The Snobs* is "Love". Can one of the principles of *Vanity Fair* be love, though one criticizes it as commonplace?

Becky's attitude seems to have some resemblance to that of the German people in the novel than that of Dobbin and Amelia. That is because Becky has a rational way of thinking, which was originally cultivated in the free and open atmosphere of her father's studio, which ultimately impels her to endeavor to climb the ladder of success regardless of birth or custom. She can talk to anyone, whoever he is:

> She [Becky] was of a wild, roving nature, inherited from father and mother, who were both Bohemians, by taste and circumstance; if a lord was not by, she would talk to his courier with the greatest pleasure.... (631)

Her attitude of treating every one impartially agrees with the concept of Geist and is the same as that of the German people when Becky, after being expelled from England and some countries on the Continent because of the scandal of falling-out with her husband, finally arrives and manages to remain in Germany:

> The German ladies, never particularly squeamish as regards morals, especially in English people, were delighted with the cleverness and wit of Mrs Osborne's charming friend [Becky].... (651)

This excerpt is controversial and the object of much debate.[7] Prawer insists that "Although, however, satire on English narrowness and philistinism is undoubtedly present in the 'Pumpernickel' portions of *Vanity Fair*, the moral outlook and social gullibility of Pumpernickel society is satirized as well"

(Prawer 15). Prawer's assertion would be appropriate if we consider only the text of the above quotation. If we read a little further, however, we find there is a more significant passage, to which Prawer does not refer:

> Love and Liberty are interpreted by those simple Germans in a way which honest folks in Yorkshire and Somersetshire little understand; and a lady might, in some philosophic and civilized towns, be divorced ever so many times from her respective husbands, and keep her character in society. (651)

This passage seems to indicate that Thackeray does not satirize the disadvantages of both the German and British societies as Prawer argues. On the contrary, it implies that there is a difference in people's attitude toward love and liberty between the two societies. Could it be that Thackeray wanted to point out that there were different standards of love and liberty in Pumpernickel?

Paying attention only to her rational way of thinking, Becky seems to be closest to the man with Geist among the main characters in *Vanity Fair*. Why, then, is she supposed to live a wretched life finally? In other words, why is Becky being punished by Thackeray? The answer is that Becky does not have love.[8] This is a decisive difference between Becky and Amelia, which can be thought to affect the final stage of their life in the novel. In his letter to his mother Mrs. Carmichael-Smyth, which was written during the publication of *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray says of Amelia that "she has at present a quality above most people whizz: LOVE — by which she shall be saved" (*Letters* 309).

Thus, considering German society in the novel, it has become evident that it has not only the "idea of science" but also

the rather elastic standards of love and liberty.

IV From Vanity to Geist

The main characters' actions in the climax of the novel have attracted attention and have been the subject of much debate because they deviate from their accepted personalities.[9] This issue has often been considered with relation to the characters' reality.[10] In other words, the main characters sometimes act a little inconsistently: like the real human beings, which can be ascribed to Thackeray's description of characters being true to life. But I think the main characters' actions in the climax are not equal to the incidental actions contradictory to their personalities in other ordinary scenes. That is because the narrator in the climax supposes that the main characters have experienced some change in their state of mind in their own way:

> But have we not all been misled about our heroes, and changed our opinions a hundred times? Emmy [Amelia], in this happy time, found that hers underwent a very great change in respect of the merits of the Major. (602)

Now, I will look back on a series of their actions in the climax. First, Dobbin, who has blindly fallen in love with Amelia, comes to understand that he has loved her for fifteen years in vain and decides to give her up: [Dobbin] "No, you [Amelia] are not worthy of the love which I have devoted you ..." (647).

Then, Becky, who has understood Dobbin's integrity from the beginning, motivated by altruism, tries to persuade Amelia to marry him, though she has hardly shown a feeling until then. Amelia, however, insists that she cannot forget her deceased husband George, who was in fact a scoundrel. Finally,

Amelia succumbs to Becky's persuasion and decides to marry Dobbin.

In this series of the character's actions, one pattern of action seems to repeat itself. It is that one comes to realize the true value of things or people through their own insight whether it is good or bad. First, Dobbin learns to know that Amelia is not the person who can appreciate the value of his love. Second, Amelia comes to notice how Dobbin is a worthy gentleman and at the same time — this is third, she comes to know that her departed husband was not her ideal husband at all. Becky, who has been described as if she knew the true value of all things with her insight, seems not to be involved in this pattern. But, she is not omniscient at all. In other words, she also has not known the value of a true or selfless love until this scene: "Indeed, she [Amelia] did not cry so much as Becky expected — the other [Becky] soothed and kissed her — a rare mark of sympathy with Mrs. Becky" (659). Thus, Becky's action in a series of other character's actions can also be incorporated in this pattern. Therefore this is the fourth pattern.

I think these character's actions in the climax could be interpreted as reflecting their mental development. If critics regard the reality of Thackeray's characters highly, they should do so in the sense that he described not only human uncertainties but also the mental development of human beings. There are several reasons why they have undergone this mental growth. One reason, I can suggest, is that it is in the German society of Pumpernickel where the main characters perform their unexpected actions. During their stay in the city, they might be inculcated with the concept of Geist through their experience and friendships with German people. That is to say, it can be thought that they have become closer to the ideal concept of

Geist in one step.

It is in the climax, adding to the mental growth of the characters, that Thackeray's message is to be found. The message should be that the importance for the British people of coming to appreciate through their own insight the truth in what they have naively followed. It is this lesson, but not a blatant one, that Thackeray did indeed mean to present to the British people. I think this can be also one of the motivating factors behind Thackeray's decision to write *Vanity Fair*.

If the ways of the main characters' mental development can be described in abstract words, it may be the phrase "From Vanity to Geist". Thus, the meaning of German society in *Vanity Fair* is deeply involved in the *raison d'être* or the whole story in terms of the concept of Geist.

NOTES

1. To my knowledge, I can cite John Kelly Mathison's *The German Sections of Vanity Fair, and Other Studies* in 1975 and S. S. Prawer's "Thackeray's Goethe: A 'Secret History'" in 1993.
2. "It was at the little comfortable Ducal town of Pumpernickel... that I first saw Colonel Dobbin and his party" (602).
3. *The Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following definition: "Spirit; spirituality; intellectuality; intelligence"
4. In 1909, C. F. G. Masterman published *The Condition of England*. Since the book was written so much later, referring to this book written in 1909 seems to be inappropriate when examining the condition of England in the early 1800s. Masterman's book is, however, full of acute observation and criticism of Victorian society at all levels.
5. Thackeray had stayed himself in Germany from 1830 and 1831, and for a few months in 1853 with his daughters. He has been in love with a German girl, drunk and made merry in a German tavern, and seen the great writer Goethe during his first stay in Germany.
6. The title *The Snobs of England* first published from 1846 to 1847 serially in *Punch* has been changed to *The Book of Snobs* when it was published

in book form in 1848.

7. Oscar Mandel annotated that Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and *Elective Affinities* (referred in this paragraph of the text) "seemed objectively lax" to the Victorian sensibility. See Mandel, Oscar. *Annotations to Vanity Fair.* Boston: UP of America, 1988. 108. See also Stewart 813.
8. Becky's cruelty or heartlessness is well described not only the scene where she is to beat her son, but also in the contrast to the situation between she and her husband Rawdon in the scene where they have to part with their son to let him go to public school:

   > Becky burst out laughing once and twice, when the Colonel [Rawdon Crawley], in his clumsy, incoherent way, tried to express his sentimental sorrows at the boy's departure. ... she did not mark his demeanour, or only treated it with a sneer. She was busy thinking about her position, or her pleasures, or her advancement in society. (503)

9. See Martin 32-33. Martin interpreted the concluding scene in this way and was disappointed in the noble Dobbin. See also Lubbock 97-115.
10. See Forster 106-107. Forster defined Becky as a so-called "round character" because "she waxes and wanes and has facets like a human being". See also Trollope 41-45.

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